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«The different ‹beings›, such as the concrete vaults, the watery drops, the chalky stalactites, and the contemplating minds, effect and affect each other reciprocally...»

BREATH OF AIR: ATMOSPHERE

Fabian Reiner

► Fabian Reiner is an Austrian architect who has completed an MSc at ETH Zurich. During his studies he went on an exchange semester at USI Mendrisio and a work stay in Copenhagen. He is now pursuing an MA in History and Critical Thinking at the Architectural Association in London. The essay ‹Breath of Air: Atmosphere› can be understood as complementary to his paper ‹Bronx Floors: The Respiration of the Emotive›.

As a concept within the architectural profession atmosphere is widely used to describe quality and ascribe meaning. Its use ranges from the highly scientific to the purely mystical — either to analyze the well-being of the human body through the study of light, temperature or materials or to describe the ephemeral qualities of a genius at work. It is all the more surprising that the great power attributed to this term has not yet led to sufficient research into its entirety. Where attempts have been taken to make the architectural atmosphere factually more tangible almost no room has been left for the social and phenomenological aspects, and where efforts were made making the issue more experiential no proof was ever all-encompassing. Despite its current immature application, it can be assumed that the concept of atmosphere will become increasingly productive in the light of current political debates on sustainability, global waste, and global warming. The present essay aims to stimulate the discussion by suggesting a complementary approach, in which atmosphere is rendered as organically active and emotionally affective. It thus grants the potential to shift our perception from the building's spatiality to the material itself.

By definition, atmosphere is a set of layers of gases that surround other solid and liquid bodies and derives its description from the Greek terms <atmos>, meaning <vapour>, and <sphaira>, meaning <ball>, and <sphere>. ⁽¹⁾ It is thus scientifically the gaseous element that differs from the haptic and graspable. That the German notion of <atmen>, which essentially translates as breathing, appears similar to the Greek <atmos> might suggest a relatedness of the terms but, in fact, turns out to be a mere semantic coincidence. Nevertheless, the notion of <atmen> proves to be fertile in adjusting our view about the architectural atmosphere towards a raised materiality-based awareness. The term <atmen> comprises at once the combination of the metabolic respiratory and metaphysical breathing. It allows simultaneously to approach the issue from the scientific as well as the speculative perspective. Not only does it help to grasp the topic by its relevance but it also joins the polar ideas of object and non-object to arrive at a discursive debate identifying tension in bodies and non-bodies, matter and non-matter as well as in human and non-human.

I THE MANIFOLDNESS OF <THE THING>

To dive headlong into the abyss of atmosphere as the unification of innumerable elements, the philosophical notion of <the Thing> ⁽²⁾ coined by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger will serve as a starting point. The gained perspective shall merely allow to approach architectural atmosphere concurrently as a <being> and as part of <beings>. ⁽³⁾ Heidegger's description of <the Thing> as a four-fold, where the divine, the mortal, the earth and the world come together, where the <jug> as being hand-formed provides everything to be a <Thing>, where the understanding of the <Thing> is separated from cognitive beings, lends itself to be applied to the spatial realm of architecture.

For reasons of convenience, more concrete explanations, and in order not to get lost in the vast realm of mere fantasizing, the built work of a concrete cistern serves as an ideal illustration to ground our thoughts. By the means of referring to a physical object, binding it to a specific thing, it



Cabo, David Hugo. *Ingvar Cronhammar's Installation H*,
at Cisternerne, Copenhagen, 2015, 2019.

is avoided to explain all other possible ‹things› or objects the world has to offer — Heidegger claims there exists a small number of things but an infinite number of objects. It is the same four-foldness being inherent in the man-made jug that can be detected in the cistern: it equally comes from the earth, sets forth the world, provides a holding, and makes possible a forth-giving. Claiming the concrete construct establishing the same manifoldness, architectural atmosphere, as a product of ‹the Thing› and a ‹thing› by itself, is intrinsically linked to it. At once it is scientifically detectable and metaphysically affective.

The Swiss architect Peter Zumthor concurs with Heidegger's thinking when he describes atmosphere as ‹this singular density and mood, this feeling of presence, well-being, harmony, beauty [...] under whose spell I experience what I otherwise would not experience in precisely this way.»⁽⁴⁾ It combines the ratio of the architect with the emotio of the perceiver and the philosophical manifoldness of Heidegger. Referring to the assumption that an increased concentration, which is always evoked through a rationale, opens new perceptions and therefore new emotions, operates unconsciously as a unification of the objective and the subjective. Thus, Zumthor's description of the construction of a mood is instructive. Implying feeling as dependent on an intensity, inevitably leads to the assumption that atmosphere is quantifiable. It is this quantification, much like a calculation always resulting in the same sum, which consequently leads to an understanding of the architectural realm as an orchestration of innumerable elements. While the general framework and the totality of atmosphere will stay the same, its parts — and here is important to note that atmospheres are part of atmosphere — bear the potential for infinitely many variations. Atmospheres are in constant flux — architecture orchestrates the constant flux.

Assigning architecture a manifoldness in its nature but necessarily relying on its vital matter, will allow to engage with atmosphere in a more sensitive and actualized manner. The concept of atmosphere must shift, if it is to regain its meaningfulness, from the highly intellectual and technological to the currently sensitive and relevant. Since every atmosphere is an architectural atmosphere and every material is in direct dialectic with atmosphere, it is our responsibility to approach this concern with care.

II ELEMENTS OF VIBRANT MATTER

The American political theorist Jane Bennett combines in her treatise ‹Vibrant Matter› the philosophical realm with a political reality and encourages a confrontation of materiality with higher sensibility. Bennett not only offers a way into more productive discussions within the current debates on sustainability, global waste, and global warming but also helps to recognize materiality as an active participant in an object-subject relationship. It can already be sensed that the non-human aspect is finally leveled to human's agency. And to raise this utter awareness the approaching of architectural matter has to be inevitably inclusive.

Based on the example of the cistern, one can argue that architectural materiality does not only produce atmosphere but becomes atmosphere — in fact, is atmosphere. It is in the cisterns that it becomes undeniably apparent that matter is vital — mist forms, drops gather, stalactites emerge, sounds occur, temperature fluctuates, emotions change and physicality is evident. Atmosphere is in constant tension with its constituents, which perpetually stimulate architecture's manifoldness. It is the matter that is dependent on its situation, relying on its location, is inseparably linked to its surroundings, and participates in its development. Even long after the cistern's completion is evoked — it breathes.

III

BREATH OF AIR

It is this biological respiration of matter which ultimately alters the objective as much as it affects the subjective. Recalling the above-mentioned notion of «atmen»,⁽⁵⁾ which essentially means breathing, and refers to the soul, one can finally see that the leap from the atmospheric biological description to the more emotive quality is not impossible — indeed, already apparent in Zumthor's description. The breathing of matter conjoins the scientific with the phenomenological.

By attributing to architecture the potential, if not to possess a soul of its own, then at least to influence our emotions, and by considering architecture as an essential force in the orchestration of an atmosphere that is not only produced or mystically evoked but perceptibly tangible, we may speculate on the direction for further studies. It is, thus, likely that step by step, the discrepancy between object and non-object will diminish. Bringing closer the connection between the cistern's respiration and its affect might raise our awareness and sensibility towards matter. For the building industry, it will simply mean that every single material, element, fragment as well as composite can be classified as the vital matter that participates not only in the present but also in the future atmosphere.

Conjoining the two polar approaches of the biologically respiring and the phenomenologically breathing it can be attempted to understand not only the established ontologically multiple relations but to grasp them. The different «beings», such as the concrete vaults, the watery drops, the chalky stalactites, and the contemplating minds, effect and affect each other reciprocally. Every matter exhibits its genealogy and every matter affects emotionally. It is the relation which can, to a certain extent, be controlled but it is the innate productive nature of matter which has to be understood and embraced. Our perception must open up towards the vital materialism — our acknowledgment directed towards the emotional, as being an equal part of the rational as it is of the biological. Atmosphere, thus, is the organic and emotional respiration of matter.

In the profession of building the architectural element often radiates a feeling of take me or leave me which is, according to Bennett, less a passivity than a vibratory tranquility. The body and in this case the architectural element is merely in a state where no improvement is necessarily needed. It is this ideal state, which permits to view matter as far from being «a flat, fixed, or

lawlike substrate.»⁽⁶⁾ It is important to understand that by bringing together the metabolic with the emotive, not only a single and unidirectional bond is created, but an infinite oscillation established.

IV

PROMISES

It has proved inadequate to consider atmosphere merely as something that encloses us or that can be willfully controlled, as initially evoked by its terminological definition. For, it is not only the surrounding of a body but, indeed, the surrounded body itself. It is inherent in every thing. In every thing, every matter, every object and every being we sense the becoming of atmosphere, sense a becoming of atmosphere. The matter, as factual as it is, under the inspection of being ontological, and the consideration of respiring biologically as well as emotionally, allows being appreciated as eventual part of atmosphere itself.

The shift from the epistemological to the ontological is meant to slowly transform the theorization of knowledge into a discussion of beings, which helps the architectural atmosphere being positioned within and tied to current global debates. That each and every architectural atmosphere resists to be under full control can be seen as an innate productive power and a material recalcitrance⁽⁷⁾ that is positive and beneficial on its own. Especially the intangible and imponderable recalcitrance, which according to Bennett is this particular, ungraspable and unchangeable, this something which lies <Out-side>, shall be embraced as the characteristically intrinsic.

It is this complex interrelation of substances, things and vibrant matter which culminates in an observation of infinitely exchanging agents constituting the breathing of air and generating tension between objects and non-objects. Bodies and beings are rendered as influential agents but the issue of atmosphere is equally a debate of a matter and mind relation — one which finds itself as much within the objective as within the subjective realm.

